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# China in 1923

(For private circulation)



## China in 1923

THE political situation in China has developed in an exactly opposite direction from what I predicted when I was out here last May. The elimination of the *tuchuns*, or military governors, and the unification of the whole country under General Wu Pei-fu then seemed assured. His decisive victory over the warlord of Manchuria, Marshall Chang, his policy of reorganizing the government in line with the provisions of the constitution, his overtures for reconciliation to Sun Yat-sen, his refraining from making himself dictator in Peking, his reassembling of Parliament, and his success in securing General Li's consent to accept the presidency during the time of transition—all seemed sure steps toward unification under his leadership. While it was understood that great difficulties lay in the pathway of any attempt to demobilize the enormous numbers of troops in the provinces, the task seemed possible because of the people's approval of General Wu's course, and their great confidence in the personal integrity of President Li.

But General Wu's program has fallen down at every point. Marshall Chang, although completely defeated on the battlefield, succeeded in getting most of his troops back home, declared his independence of the Peking government, and remained impregnable in the Manchurian stronghold.

Dr. Sun Yat-sen declined all offers of reconciliation with Peking, and, in spite of being the most democratic leader in China, allied himself with the autocratic Marshall Chang. Dr. Sun's uncompromising attitude toward Peking was a heavy blow because, although he has but a small military following, his hold upon the people of South China, especially the Cantonese, makes him an essential factor in the integration of the divided forces of the nation.

Parliament, since its assembly in Peking, has proven a hindrance rather than a help to the newly organized government. There has been no election of members since Yuan Shi-kai illegally dissolved Parliament just before his death. Its remnants were brought together by President Li, but it is so long since the members were chosen that they are but poor presentday representatives of the people. Moreover, Parliament has not proven superior to the pressure brought to bear upon them by various military leaders through threats, bribes and other influence.

President Li is in a most difficult position. The Peking government has found itself lacking in both revenue and power. No province pays taxes nor is bound by the government's mandates. Such revenues as are secured are supplied by a certain surplus from the revenues collected from the Maritime Customs and the Salt Gabelle, both of which are under the supervision and control of the

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foreign powers. Without this support the government would have fallen long ago. The President is thus without power, except that of his personal influence, and almost without funds. He has been either unwilling or unable to take the strong measures necessary to dominate the situation.

General Wu Pei-fu, who promised after his victory over Marshall Chang to be the greatest force for unification by constitutional means, seems finally to have become discouraged in his attempts to accomplish this and is determined to attempt unification by military force. The indications are that in shifting his program he has lost the popular favor, and that there is little chance of success along the new road which he is travelling.

Not only have General Wu's plans for unification failed, but in the meantime the processes of disintegration have made rapid progress. The power of the *tuchuns* has not been weakened by their subjection to Peking but rather by their losing hold upon their own provinces. Their own forces are more and more getting out of hand. The revolt of generals and lower military officials from the *tuchuns* is constantly taking place.

Military control is thus becoming enormously diffused. A year ago the country was largely under the rule of about a dozen *tuchuns* and three *super-tuchuns*. Today the situation is far different. I was reliably informed, while in South China, that the province of Canton then had twenty-seven independent governments.

The military unit is becoming smaller and smaller, and conflicts between rival military leaders are becoming more frequent. Bandits are rapidly increasing. The soldiers of a defeated military leader scatter over the country districts amongst the defenseless people. The defeated soldiers are without food, clothing or money, but they have arms and ammunition. The temptation to take by force what they cannot earn is often irresistible. The peace loving and well-to-do farmers in a bandit infested region can secure immunity for themselves and their families if they will "tie their heads to their trouser belts," to use the picturesque Chinese expression, and take to the road.

The soldiers are billeted in the larger towns and cities, but in certain districts, at any rate, and probably in many of them, the bandits and the soldiers are secretly in league with each other. The soldiers are sent out from the city to the country districts to capture the bandits. Instead, they often capture the innocent country people and execute them as bandits. The soldiers are also suspected of supplying guns and ammunition to the bandit leaders. There is suspicion also that some of the bandit leaders are being furnished ammunition and arms by representatives of foreign powers. Not less than eight provinces are thus harassed by bandits.



In the Province of Canton there is much piracy. The canals and rivers of the Delta are, in times of peace, filled with boats. All traffic of this kind has had to be stopped at night, and much of it even during the day. People of wealth have had to make their way to the port cities. Thus the wealth of the country and its very best people are being withdrawn from the interior of China. The *tuchuns* of some of the provinces have succeeded in maintaining their supremacy, but much more than half of the population of the country and three-quarters of the territory are under the semi-chaotic conditions which I have described.

The worst aspect of the situation is the influence of these conditions upon the morals of the people. In order to obtain revenue the military leaders are capitalizing vice. For example, Canton had forbidden prostitution and gambling. Both have been brought back and legitimatized. Great gambling palaces have been established and are being conducted openly. In the city of Swatow, in every block in the heart of the city, I found from six to eight gambling places, all newly opened.

Another method of increasing the revenue of the military leaders, especially in South China, is the growing of opium. Ten years ago the whole evil throughout China was practically eliminated. Now you find the fields of South China ablaze with the brilliant and many colored flowers of the poppy. In order to induce the growing of opium, the military leaders have put such an enormous tax upon the land that no other crop can be grown. The tax is larger than the entire value of the rice crop. The utilization of the land for opium rather than for rice is increasing the price of rice, so that the cost of living is rising rapidly.

The *tuchuns* and lesser military officials are thus virtually engaged in the business of transforming a peaceable, moral people into bandits, pirates, prostitutes, gamblers, opium raisers and opium smokers—all on a wholesale scale.

I have drawn a gloomy picture and you may consider the situation hopeless, but this would be a very false diagnosis. The government is disintegrating, but not the nation. The government is divided, but the people of China are still united. They are not even divided, like the people of England or America, into two or three strong political parties. The prophecy that China would move after the Washington Conference on the road to unification was not wrong. The mistake we all made was in pre-judging the method by which this end would be accomplished. It seemed then that under the leadership of General Wu Pei-fu compromises might be effected amongst the military leaders and their consent secured to the recognition of a constitutional government. This has failed, but the elimination of the military leaders has made progress. They are eliminating themselves. The *tuchuns* are all distinctly weaker. The burden of



securing funds for the support of the more than a million men now under arms is becoming intolerable. The constant demands upon the people for support, the outbreak of banditry and the offending of the moral sense of the people by the growing of opium and the licensing of gambling and prostitution are more completely unifying the nation, and forcing it into determined and immediate steps to overthrow the whole military system.

I have been amazed to find how optimistic the best Chinese whom I have met feel as to the situation. This is true also of most of the best informed foreigners. As this is being written, I am travelling with an intimate friend of President Li and Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Dr. David Yui, the National General Secretary of the Y. M. C. A. in China, one of the two citizens chosen by the Associated Chambers of Commerce and the United Educational Associations to represent China at the Washington Conference, and one of the best informed men on the situation anywhere in the country.

I asked Dr. Yui if the multiplying of military leaders and the threatened chaos in the country did not alarm him. He replied that the increase of the number of military leaders was, to his mind, one of the most encouraging signs.

"The downfall of militarism," he continued, "is to come by this limiting of the fields of the military leaders. The only way militarism can be broken down in China is through the conflict between the leaders themselves. The increase in the number of military leaders is lessening the area of influence of each one, and as each of these leaders is becoming weaker, the influence of the people is growing stronger. The growing influence of public opinion in China is unmistakable. In any great struggle the military leader who acts in accord with the wishes of the people wins. It is also true that the military habit grows upon some men, and the man who has represented the people becomes autocratic. But the interesting thing is that he invites defeat the moment he does this or soon after. General Wu is a striking example. In his two wars against the Anfu Clique and Marshall Chang Tso-lin he had the support of the people. In his present desire to unite China under military force he is opposed by the people. This will mean his defeat.

"Too much attention must not be given," he added, "to what the government is or is not. The Chinese people have shown for centuries an ability to get along without much government or in spite of a bad government. Even during the Manchu dynasty the villages of China ruled themselves under a clan system. The only contact which they had with the government was in paying their taxes. The fact is that despite the disorder created by militarism, the people are still able to go through and recover from typhoons, earthquakes, revolutions, piracy, attacks by bandits, and other calamities.



"We Chinese have an abiding conviction, and this is based upon history, that the opinion of the people will ultimately win out. The Chinese rulers, even during the days of autocratic government in China, were taught to respect the wishes of the people. It is stated in the Classics that Heaven looks at the administration of government through the eyes of the people, and that Heaven hears the voice of government through the ears of the people. Even the Emperors, who were supposed to be supreme in authority, found that they had to respect the wishes of the people. That doctrine has been so thoroughly ingrained in the minds of the rulers that no matter how strong their position they do not dare overlook for long the will of the people. Take, for example, Yuan Shi-kai. He wanted to become Emperor. Why did he not make himself Emperor at once? There was no military leader in China who dared oppose him. He realized that he could not do this without at least a show of approval from the people. So he sent agents to every province to manufacture the wishes of the people in favor of his becoming Emperor. The more tricks like this he played, the weaker became his position. The people became disgusted with him. The opposition against him spread like a fire over the whole country. If the people had not opposed his will, no military power which existed in the country could have done so. He was not resisted by military means; his attempt simply collapsed in the face of public opinion. The present military regime is bound to have the same end."

"But what disturbs me," I said to Dr. Yui, "is that the military leaders are making an assault upon the moral character of these people?"

Dr. Yui replied, "These are the stages through which we must pass. There is no other way out. We may help make the period as brief as possible, but we cannot avoid it. The Chinese people probably require these things to awaken their sense of political responsibility. I have said that the people could get along without government. That is a good point, and yet it has its weakness in leading them to take no interest in government. They say, 'Government is a necessary evil. Let it be, but we will have nothing to do with it.' That feeling has prevailed amongst the Chinese so long that it requires a mighty shock and intense suffering to make them realize that while they are capable of taking care of themselves without much government, they must accept the responsibility of seeing that what government does exist is good government."

The position of the military leader is becoming increasingly difficult. In order to protect himself against his neighbor it is necessary for each one constantly to enlarge his force, and he must resort to stronger and stronger measures for revenue. At first the accumulated funds of the government were thus squandered; then



public property was disposed of; and finally larger and larger taxes were imposed, and in some cases loans from foreigners were secured and priceless concessions made to them. Now these sources of income are becoming more and more exhausted, and the people more and more incensed. Dr. W. W. Yen, formerly the Premier, said to me recently, in Peking, that there is not one of these *tuchuns* who is not anxious to give up his post. As an illustration, he mentioned the most powerful one who was eager to retire, but his generals forbade it, saying, "If you retire, our heads will be taken off."

While this weakening of the military leaders is taking place, a quiet, unobserved but widespread and effective process is taking place in educating public opinion and in perfecting plans for the expression of the will of the people. This process was really begun by the students several years ago in what was known as the Student Movement. It has now been taken up by older and more responsible elements in the nation. All of the chambers of commerce of the country are organized and united, and their combined influence is the most powerful, single, non-military influence in China. Their meetings are devoted not only to discussing commercial affairs, but in trying to find a way out of the political situation. They are attempting by all possible means to starve the military leaders. This is what lies back of China's inimicable attitude toward the Consortium. There is a strong feeling that if foreigners will not subsidize the present regime, the Chinese themselves can throw it off. In fact, Dr. Sun Yat-sen holds that the surplus revenues from the Maritime Customs and the Salt Gabelle is responsible for the present situation. "If it were not for the money thus turned over to China by the representatives of foreign countries," he said to me, "we should have had peace in China long ago; and we could today establish peace in six months if the foreign powers would only hold these funds and not turn them in to Peking."

The educational associations of the country have also united and are bringing their influence to bear for unification. They are a much more powerful factor in China, a land which has been ruled by her scholars for two thousand years, than it is easy for us to imagine in the West.

The Chinese hate militarism. This hatred extends to almost every coolie. There is probably no other nation on earth which is convinced of the futility of force. The military regime is therefore running contrary to the deepest and strongest currents of national conviction, and it takes no peculiar insight to see that it is doomed.

In expressing this assurance as to the outcome, I do not mean to imply that the situation can be cleared in a day, except in the sense that a day in the life of a nation is much longer than the twenty-four hours between sunrise and sunset. As Dr. Yui has



indicated, the Chinese people must learn that their thousands of years of disregard of government must be abandoned, and that they must take the trouble to govern themselves. I fear that this lesson must be burned into their souls with a red hot iron.

The present chaotic condition is apt to leave a trail of evil consequences which one trembles to face. The next few years may be a time in which to test the friends of China. We must not be discouraged at disturbances which are bound to occur when so many millions of people are without the benefit of ordered government. The road to unification and constitutional government is longer and rougher than seemed likely a year ago, but it is no less sure. The present process is more painful but also more educative than the easy pacification under Wu Pei-fu and President Li.

This is a time for releasing the forces of evil; but it is also a time for releasing the forces of good. The peril of the situation is calling out the very best in the Chinese people. Men who have been self-centered are expending their lives for others. Indications of this are seen everywhere. It is more conspicuous among the Christians; but it is striking even among the non-Christians. The other day in Amoy I visited a school of nineteen hundred students founded and supported by a man who had gone penniless as a laborer few years ago to the Straits Settlements. In addition to this school, he has founded a university that now has a program of an expenditure of \$M 50,000. a month for construction alone. He became a multi-millionaire and has given all his wealth away for the education of his people. All over China are teachers in government colleges who have not received their salaries for months but are holding on because they believe that education is necessary to prevent ruin to the country. The Young Men's Christian Associations of China show an interest in social service which surpasses that of any other Association Movement in the world. It is in crises like this that we may make demands upon the highest and best in the nation and know that there will be a ready response.

This accounts, no doubt, in a measure for the great progress which I notice in all philanthropic and religious endeavor. The Christian colleges are filled to overflowing. The Young Men's Christian Associations, in spite of the financial stringency throughout the country which is inseparable from such a political situation, are continuing to make great progress. This is a time to show our friendship for China and to reinforce every constructive effort in her behalf.

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